

History of the surname O'Rourke



History of the Irish name O'Rourke. Image copyright Ireland Calling

The surnames Rourke and O'Rourke are ancient and noble Irish names that originated in what is now the Counties Cavan and Leitrim.

They were descended from Vikings and became an important family in the Middle Ages. They ruled over large territories.

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There are other variations to the name including Drouke, Groarke, Gorke, McRoarke, McRoric, McRourke, O'Rorke, Roark, Roarke and Rouark.

Descended from Vikings

The names are derived from the old Gaelic name O' Ruairc. The 'O' prefix meant 'grandson of' or 'decendent of' while Ruairc was a personal name. It was a Norse-Viking name and would have been introduced to Ireland during the early Viking invasions which began in in the late eighth century.

Ruairc would have been a Viking who stayed in Ireland after the raid rather than return home. He began a clan which developed into a powerful dynasty in the Kingdom of Breffny. This was the part of Ireland that now consists of the most of Counties Cavan and Leitrim as well as areas in Co Sligo.

King of Breffny

The O'Roukes once ruled over the kingdom. Tiernán O'Rourke was the 19th King of Breffny but was betrayed by Hugh de Lacy in 1172. He was beheaded and his head was taken to Dublin and put on display by the Anglo-Normans.

There was no long reigning king of Breffny for the next 100 years as there was plenty of in-fighting between the O'Roukes for power. This gave the O'Reillys an opportunity to come from the East and attempt to seize control.

Battle with the O'Reillys

There was a long running power struggle between the O'Roukes and the O'Reillys which led to the great battle near Ballinamore in 1256. The O'Roukes were victorious in holding off the O'Reillys but they still lost half of their kingdom.

Brefffny was split into two kingdoms. The O'Reillys took East Brefffny while the O'Roukes were left with West Brefffny. They ruled West Brefffny until the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in England. The kingdom was then separated into the counties we know today as Cavan and Leitrim.

The name develops and travels the world

In the 17th century, many Irish families anglicised their names after the English had taken control of Ireland. They dropped the prefixes and the names were written with an English spelling. This was often English clerks writing down the names in the way they best understood phonetically. This led to many variations of the same original surname.



Mickey Rourke

In the 19th century, the name spread across the world. The potato famine had devastated Ireland and many people emigrated to America, Australia, Britain and Canada to escape starvation and disease and look for better opportunities.

Famous Rourkes

Mickey Rourke is an American actor. He appeared in several critically acclaimed movies in the 1980s such as Rumble Fish, 9 ½ Weeks, Diner, Angel Heart and Barfly.

In the 1990s he quit acting to follow his dream and become a boxer. He had a short lived but unbeaten six fight professional career in the early 1990s. He has since returned to acting and starred in more hit movies such as Sin City and the Wrestler.

Andy Rouke is a British musician from Manchester. He is best known as the bass player for the Smiths. The Smiths had a lot of success and critical acclaim in the 1980s and are remembered as one of Britain's most influential bands.

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